Myth and History in the Selected Novels of Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh

A Synopsis

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The term 'fiction' refers to the literature which describes the imaginary people or characters in imaginary event or situation while fact aims at presenting truth or reality. History and myth, like fact and fiction, have often been presented as opposites. When we define the word 'Myth' in colloquial terms, we often refer to an untrue story or anything that is opposed to reality. It can be defined in words of M. H. Abrams:

> Myth is one story in mythology- a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.[1]

Thus, 'myth' is understood as a traditional but unauthentic story or tale created by ancient sage and seers in order to interpret the nature of existence. The word 'myth' has been derived from the Greek word 'Mythos' which means 'word' or 'story' that has been rooted in religion or folk beliefs of that time. On the other hand, 'History' is based on the fact. Etymologically, the term is derived from the Greek word 'historia' which means inquiry, interview and interrogation of an eyewitness and also the reports of such actions. According to Aron, "History in the narrow sense, is the science of the human past. In the wider sense, it studies the development of the earth, of the heavens and of species, as well as of civilization."[2]

Although the origin of History can be traced back to the oldest time when the art of writing had been mastered by the people. The earliest manuscripts of history were written in

[1] Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed.. New Delhi: Thomson Business International India Pvt Ltd, 2006. 170. Print.
[2] Aron, as quoted in Shah Nila, *Novel As History*. New Delhi. Creative Books. 2003. 9. Print.

favour of the kings, military victories and monarchial achievements. Before the emergence of writing skills, important happenings were preserved in the form of myths, folk-tales and panegyric songs and were transferred from generation to generation orally. Yet other accounts which were recorded in more organized form turned out to be epics. Then onward history was separated from folk tales and myth as the latter were considered to be opposite to 'truth' and 'fact'. The refined concept of history proposed that history is objective, linear and based on facts. As Arnold Toynbee states:

> History, like the drama and the novel, grew out of mythology, a primitive form of apprehension and expression in which- as in fairy tales listened to by children or in dreams dreamt by sophisticated adults- the line between fact and fiction is left undrawn.[3]

In ancient India, the concept of myth and history was nurtured in a different way. These terms were not taken as separate from each other but combined together. History is not merely the presentation of facts or the occurrences of past. It is considered as a means to attain the fourfold objects of life. The traditional definition of history found in ancient India is linked with the four aspects of life. According to that notion, history teaches us all about *dharma* (religion), *arth* (science of wealth), *kam* (action) and *moksh* (salvation). Moreover it tells us the tales of past. Thus, there is a conceptual difference between Indian and western notions of history.

History is not the opposite of myth. History is more scientific than myth. History searches for the objective truth of events whereas myth is a story in popular memory which does not try to reach objective fact. Myth, which explains adequately an event and people's relation to it, is accepted in that society. Myth resembles history but unlike history, its

[3] Toyenbee, Arnold, as quoted in Shah, Nila. *Novel As History*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2003. 25. Print.

purpose is not to present events truthfully. The myth's purpose is to tell one's identity, culture and belonging while history is a past narrative of truth.

These complex concepts of myth and history have fascinated and drawn attention of people from a variety of disciplines such as classics, anthropology, linguistics and psychology to study them in relation to their own preoccupation. As for anthropologists, the term 'myth' does not mean an untrue story or something i.e. opposed to reality. Instead it refers a narrative which is part of a traditional outlook or cosmology. This cosmology may include humans, ancestors and gods and is often considered in religious terms. Myth which is used to transmit this cosmology often explains origins and records clan genealogies. These myths are usually remembered because they are passed down through the generations by oral transmission, often in a ritualized context. These are myths that people believe and take meaning from.

In the past, anthropologists sometimes assumed that there was only one version of myth which they then took as representative of the entire tradition of the people they were studying, although Levi Strauss had stated that there was no 'single true version'. The concept of myth is taken seriously in anthropology in understanding how people think about the world in different cultures. Myth is not false but shapes people's conceptions in particular ways. There is no one version of a myth or narrative in oral cultures that can be called the only 'correct' or 'true' one.

However, psychoanalysts like Freud acclaimed myth "to be the great primordial truth, the precipitate of the unconscious"[4]. Jung describes myth as a "textbook of archetypes or the expression of the archetype"[5]. Frye differentiates myths and archetypes in the glossary to his

[4] Sankaran, Chitra. *The Myth Connection*. New Delhi: Allied Publication, 1993. 1. Print.
[5] Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness*. US: Princeton University Press, 1981. As quoted in Chandra, N. D. R. *Modern Literary Criticism, Theory and Practice*. New Delhi: Authors

Anatomy of Criticism: "Archetype: a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of ones literary experience as a whole. Myth: a narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that happen only in stories"[6]

Like archetype, myth is different from folktale and legend also. M. H. Abrams has clearly defined all of these- "If the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend. If the story concerns supernatural beings but is not a part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale."[7]

Levi Strauss in his book *Myth and Meaning* raises the problem regarding the particular line where the mythology ends and history starts and concludes as "history… not at all separated from but as continuation of mythology"[8]. In the essay "Myth and History" Elie Wiesel observes that "there is myth in history just as there is history in myth."[9]

Likewise, it is difficult to demarcate a line between historical fact and myth. The opposition between these two terms was acceptable earlier but now it is discarded because the two have a fluid relationship as they overlap. The factor which differentiates them is 'time'. The time factor has also been a cause of conflicting world views. Jan Muhammed makes the same distinction using different terms. "Literate cultures generate 'historical' while 'oral' cultures generate 'mythic' accounts of the world." [10]

Press, 2003. 164. Print.

[6] Frye, Herman Northop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. United States: Princeton University Press, 1957. As quoted in Chandra, N. D. R. *Modern Literary Criticism, Theory and Practice*. New Delhi: Authors Press, 2003. 166. Print.

[7] Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed.. New Delhi: Thomson Business International India Pvt. Ltd., 2006. 170. Print.

[8] Strauss, Levi. *Myth and Meaning*. U.K.: Routledge Classics, 1978. 37. Print.

[9] Weisel, Elie. "Myth and History" *Symbol, Myth and Reality.* Ed. Alan M. Olson. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980. 22. Print.

[10] Dhar, T. N. "History, Myth and the Post-colonial: The Indian Context" *Interrogating Post- Colonialism, theory, text and context.* Eds. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukharjee. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Study, 2000. 154. Print.

Mythology has been a rich source of inspiration for authors. Its influence has been immense which is evident since the ancient Greeks and Romans began telling stories about gods and goddesses. Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* focus on the events surrounding the Trojan War. *Theogony* and *Works And Days*, the two poems of Hesiod, Homer's contemporary, contain accounts of the earlier Greek myths such as the genesis of the world, the succession of human ages, and the origin of human woes, etc. *The Divine Comedy* and the *Aenied* written by the Italian poet Dante and the Roman poet Virgil respectively, are based on mythological themes. The great Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphosis* consists of a great range of stories from Roman mythology.

In the recent Indian fiction in English, the principle involved in combining myth and history is "the preservation of tradition while breaking away from it"[11]. It can be understood as the adherence to one's culture and tradition. In the modern literature myth and history have acquired a great significance because the modern writers find myths as means to understand as well as to portray the life of the contemporary man and their own perception of it. In order to view the contemporary human situation, the writer has to trace the mythical situation and characters in the modern context and its relevance to it. It helps the writer leave an impact upon readers because of their previous knowledge of myths.

The Indo-Anglian novel is mainly a twentieth century phenomenon. It centred on the portrayal of contemporary life and events. The writers attempted to describe the rural and domestic life in India along with the moral conduct, social evils and the insularities of the religious customs. With the emergence of Gandhian Movement, the novelists turned their attention towards the events of contemporary history. The struggle for freedom which shook the country for almost three decades attracted the creative writers. Thus the thirties in

[11] Rao, A. S. *Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2000. 1. Print.

particular witnessed a rich harvest of novels dealing with historical themes. Raja Rao, one of the leading stars of Indian English Fiction, fictionalized the national struggle as a mythic and symbolic event.

> Raja Rao's gifts as a story teller and as a myth-maker are seen in the way in which he 'mythologises' contemporary events and lends to them a peculiar native colour and resonance. He draws inspiration from the resources of the Indian myth and legend, episode and anecdote, and creates an ethos all its own.[12]

Raja Rao belonged to a south Indian Brahmin family. He was born in 1909 in the village of Hassana, in Mysor. He received his higher education from Nizam College, Hyderabad and later went to France to continue his study of French literature as he was inspired by Prof. Dickinson to study French language and literature. There he studied at the universities of Monterpellier and Sorbonne. He worked for the doctorate degree under the supervision of the well known scholar Prof. Cazamian. There, he married a French girl named Catherine which was not successful. Later he mentioned the breakdown of his marriage in one of his novels.

Rao wrote his first debut novel *Kanthapura* in 1938 in France. The collection of stories entitled *The Cow of the Barricades* was published in 1947. These stories reveal writer's love for his motherland and the social issues of the 1930s. His second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) was published after a gap of twenty-two years. Another novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1947) is primarily a 'philosophical comedy' and it sets in the times of famine of 1942. *The Policeman and the Rose and Other Stories* (1978), a collection

[12] Rao, K. R. *The Fiction of Raja Rao*. Aurangabad: Primal Prakashan, 1980. 26. Print.

includes a few other stories written subsequent to those which were published in *The Cow and the Barricades*. One of the finest stories of this collection is *India: A Fable*.

Kanthapura is the story of an Indian village during the period of Gandhi's political activism. It gives the most vivid, graphic and realistic account of Gandhian freedom struggle in 1930s and its impact on the masses of India. The story is told by an old and simple hearted woman Achakka. The freedom struggle is presented as a symbolic clash between the gods and demons that is the forces of good and evil. Moorthy, the central figure, is a staunch Gandhi man who inspires and explains to the villagers the significance of Gandhi's struggle for independence. *Kanthapura* is a perfect combination of myth, legends, folk-tales and symbols. The goddess Kenchamma is a symbol of protector, invoked by the villagers for the success of the freedom movement. Gandhi is given the status of a god as he is first identified with Rama, for killing the demon Ravana (Britishers) and then with Krishna, killing the Kaliya. Moorthy is regarded *Avtar* in the novel. Satyagrah has been presented as a religious ceremony.

The second novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is largely an autobiographical fiction. The plot of the novel revolves around the character of Ramaswamy, a south Indian Brahmin who is married to Madeleine, a French school teacher. Though their marriage is the central theme of the novel yet mainly the quest for spirituality is sustained. In a letter to M.K. Naik, Raja Rao declares about the novel, "the main theme is the futility and barrenness of man in human existence when man (or woman) has no deep quest, a thirst for the ultimate."[13] Raja Rao has infused several myths in this novel. Such as Ramaswamy's spiritual quest resembles the Upanishadic character Nachiketa. The relation of Savitri and Rama is compared to the myth of Savithri and Satyavan. Moreover the myths of Rama, the poetess Mira, Radha Krishna and Shiv Parvati are referred in the novel.

[13] Sankaran, Chitra. *The Myth Connection*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers limited, 1993. 94. Print.

The 1980s saw the emergence of some great novelists like Allen Sealy, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Ranga Rao, Bharati Mukharjee, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. These writers have widened the scope of Indian novel in English both thematically and technically. Indian novelists in English cover a wide range of themes-social, historical, romantic, detective, rural, psychological and existential, cross cultural conflict, freedom movement and the theme of partition of the country.

Salman Rushdie, a well known novelist and essayist of present era, was born on June, 1947 in Bombay. He grew up in Mumbai and went to Cambridge (England) for higher studies. In 2004, he married for the fourth time, to a known Indian model and actress Padma Laxmi. His career began with *Grimus* (1975), a fantastic tale, part science fiction, which could not attract the readers and literary critics. But his next novel *Midnight's Children* (1980), however, brought him literary fame and was considered his best work. This novel was later awarded the 'Booker of Bookers' prize in 1993. After the success of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie wrote the novel, *Shame* in which he depicted the political turmoil in Pakistan. In 1988, his allegorical novel *The Satanic Verses* came which shook the world with its rebellious views on Islam and enraged many Muslims, including Ayatollah Khomeini, who issued a *Fatwa* sentencing Rushdie to death in 1989. This caused violence in several places where the book was sold and Rushdie had to go into hiding for several years. In that period, he wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Poppies* (1990), a novelistic allegory against censorship; *East, West* (1995), a book of short stories and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), a novel that presents India's recent history through the life of a Jewish-Christian family. The Fatwa was lifted in 1998. Later in 1999, his next novel *The Ground beneath Her Feet* was published.

Midnight's children (1980) is a postmodern fiction. It deals with the story of India from 1910 to the declaration of the emergency in 1976. It is the saga of Saleem Sinai, a

protagonist and narrator, born on the midnight of 15 August, 1947, in the background of the history of India. The novel is divided into three parts, each one dealing with the different stages of Saleem's life and the lives of his family members. "it is a multi-faceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical *bildungsroman*, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory, a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy, and a daring experiment in form and style."[14]

Shame (1983) is another magnificent work of Rushdie. He projects the history of Pakistan with reference to the lives of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and their relationship. Moreover, the central theme is the violence that is born out of shame which is explored through various characters in the novel who stand for shame and shamelessness as Omar Khayyam, the chief protagonist, stands for shamelessness and Sufiya Zinobia for shame.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999) stands apart from Rushdie's other novels. He deals with the theme of love for the first time in this novel. He implies a symbolic parallel between a modern love story and an ancient myth: the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in the context of modern popular music. The story begins in the late 1980s but goes back to trace the history of 1950s-1990s. Umeed Rai Merchant, the narrator of the novel tells the story of two migrants, Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara, the Indian rock stars whose band becomes the most popular musical group in the world. The minor characters provide the vivid portraits of cultures and backgrounds in the story.

The other renowned postcolonial novelist is Amitav Ghosh. He is a popular novelist, journalist, anthropologist and a professor. He was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956. He studied in Delhi, Oxford, Alexendria and wrote a number of novels. The novels are *The*

[14] Naik, M. K. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000 A Critical Survey*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2001. 39. Print.

Circle of Reason (1986), The Hungry Tide (2004), The Shadow Lines (1988), In An Antique Land (1992), Calcutta Chromosome (1995), Dancing in Cambodia (1998), The Glass Palace (2000), the first two volumes of *The Ibis Trilogy; Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke.* He won a large number of awards for his works and received recognition in all over the world. *The Circle of Reason* was awarded France's Prix Medicis award in 1990 and *The Shadow Lines* won two prestigious awards in the same year- the Sahitya Akademi award and Anand Puraskar. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won Arthur C. Clark award in 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the international e-book award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001. In 2005, *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize. The novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) was awarded Crossword Book Prize and The India Plaza Golden Quill Award.

The novel, *The Glass Palace* is a historical novel as well as a political saga. It sets in Burma, Bengal, India, Malaya and addresses the relationship between India and Burma during the British colonial period. The novel begins in Burma, literally in the last days of independence before the British invasion in 1885. The royal family, living in the Glass Palace, is thrown out of the palace and is exiled to Ratnagiri in India. Along with the history of the fall of king Thibew, another story goes in parallel. It tells the story of a young orphan boy Rajkumar who falls in love with one of the maids of royal family, Dolly. Ghosh charts the history of Burmese along with the rising fortune of Rajkumar.

Another novel of Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* is set in the distinct island named Sundarbans (Bay of Bengal) which lies between the sea and the land. The story begins with Pia's visit to the Sundarbans for her research work where she comes to know about the cultural system of Sundarbans. The myth of Bon-bibi is introduced which is an inevitable part of its cultural system. Bon-bibi is presented as a maternal super power, above the consideration of being Muslim or Hindu. She is revered equally by Hindu and Muslim. This myth reflects the cultural ethos of the place called Sundarbans that is wrought with the

history of Marichjhapi massacre 1978-79. The hidden reality of Marichjhapi massacre is brought out through the diary of Nirmal, Kanai's uncle. In the novel, the reality of a cultural system where recorded history, unrecorded human tales, myth and politics- all unite to form the narrative is projected.

The novel *The Circle of Reason* is a unique blend of myth and history. It records the adventurous journey of the protagonist Alu whose real name is Nachiketa Bose. Along with this one story, several other narratives are mingled. The name Nachiketa has a mythical significance as in mythology, Nachiketa is the boy who waits at Yama's doors on the order of his father. In the novel, Alu is a young master weaver who is alleged a terrorist wrongly. He, like a vagabond, rushes to Calcutta, from there to Kerala and finally on a boat to Al-Ghazira. This journey adds the element of thrill and adventure to the novel. Through his skill of weaving, the novelist gives a wide historical perspective of the skill of weaving and its importance in all over the world.

A survey of literature on Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh reveals that several researches have been conducted on these writers. The earlier researches have dealt with different aspects including the mingling of history and myth in their novels. The works of Raja Rao have been analyzed many times by several critics and researchers. Kaushal Sharma has given a fair assessment of Raja Rao's novels in his book *Raja Rao: A Study of His Themes and Techniques* (2005). The thematic as well as the stylistic aspects of Rao's writings are evaluated in this book. Likewise, other critics also have performed critical evaluation of Rao's novels in their works as K. R. Rao, in the book *The Fiction of Raja Rao* (1980) has discussed the various aspects of Rao's novels. A number of papers are written about his novels. John B. Alphonso Karkala, in his paper, "Myth, Matrix and Meaning in Literature and in Raja Rao's Novel, *Kanthapura*"(1980), gives a detailed introduction of the concept of myth in reference to diverse cultures and its mythology and interprets it in

Kanthapura. Pradip Kumar Patra, in the paper "Blend of Myth and Reality: A study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*" (2007), explores the use of myth in the context of present reality. Chitra Sankaran's *The Myth Connection* (1993) highlights the use of several myths in the novels of Raja Rao. S. Nagrajan, in his paper, "A Note on Myth and Ritual in *The Serpent and the Rope*"(2000) discusses the various mythological references and rituals referred in the novel. Similarly, Paul Sharrad has analyzed the style and technique to impart the various myths by Raja Rao, in his paper, "Aspects of Mythic Form and Style in *the Serpent and the Rope*" (2000).

Salman Rushdie's unique and new subjects in his novels have captured the attention of various researchers and critics. Christopher Rollason, in his paper, "Ruhdie's Un- Indian Music: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*" (2000), studies the use of myth, auto-biographical element and reappearance of the characters and places from previous novels. Sarah Habib Bounse, in the essay "Hybridity and Post-Coloniality: Formal, Social and Historical Innovations in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" (2009), evaluates the novel from historical perspective. Along with various techniques, the blend of nation's history with the individual's family saga is explored in this essay. Syed Mujeebuddin, in "Centres and Margins: *Shame's* 'Other' nation" (2011), analyzes the picture of Pakistan. Neluka Silva presents the variety and complexity in the characters with special reference to the female characters in her essay "The Politics of Repression and Resistance in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*" (2011).

Amitav Ghosh's novels too are discussed by a large number of critics and researchers. Bhagabat Nayak, in his paper, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: A Post-Colonial Approach" (2007), has given the geographical account of the place 'Sunderbans' and traces its history from the time, it was discovered. Rakhee Moral, in her paper "In time of the Breaking of Nations: *The Glass Palace* as Postcolonial narrative" (2006), explores the history

of nation (Burma) in relation to the life of one central protagonist. G J V Prasad analyzes the novel *The Circle of Reason* in its division into three parts- *Satwa, Rajas* and *Tamas* in his paper entitled "Rewriting the world: *The Circle of Reason* as the Beginning of the Quest"(2003). Ghose's art of narration or story telling is critically discussed by Prasad. Aruna Mukhopadhyaya highlights the blend of myths in her paper "College of Myths: Amitav Gho*sh's The Circle of Reason*" (2000).

On the basis of the survey of literature related to these writers, it is clear that use of myth and history has been taken for study by some researchers but a comparative study of the use of myth and history in these writers has not been done at a great scale. In addition, the research done in this field has been very scanty therefore a full length research is required in this field.

These three writers Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh are very significant in Indian English Literature. Having their own peculiar qualities, they are similar on several grounds as myth and history are the chief sources from where they derive themes, subjects and plot, etc. blending of myth and history is a marked trait of their style of writing. Raja Rao belongs to the group of the first three leading stars of Indian English fiction who laid the foundation with their famous novels. Rao has written novels during the time of Independence. Thus his novels are very much inspired by Indian mythology and history of Independence. On the other hand, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh belong to another group which emerged later with the new themes, ideas and techniques. Salman Rushdie introduced new techniques and themes which gained appreciation and his techniques were followed by others. Likewise, Amitav Ghosh did a lot of experimentation in fiction which brought him recognition on International level. These two writers are not confined to the Indian history and mythology but take the world history and mythology as the big sources for their writings.

The objectives of the proposed study would be:

- To have a historical perspective of Indian English fiction from earliest time till date
- To explore the concept of myth and history in Indian English fiction
- To analyze the use of myth and history in the selected novels of Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh separately
- To make a comparative study of Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

To attain these objectives, the chapter scheme of the study is proposed as:

Chapter I- Introduction

Chapter II- Myth and History in the Selected Novels of Raja Rao.

Chapter III- Myth and History in the Selected Novels of Salman Rushdie.

Chapter IV- Myth and History in the Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh.

Chapter V- Comparative Study of Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

Chapter VI- Conclusion.

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